

Local Dump Transformed to World-Class Biological Heritage Site

By Richie Hewer

Records and maps of the nineteenth and early twentieth century show church lands (glebelands) and farms (Wood Farm, White`s Farm, and Brasenose Farm) in this part of Oxford.

In the 1920s and 1930s the Bulan Road residential area was constructed.

The Churchill Hospital was built by the American Military during World War II.

In the early 1950s the Town Furze, Peat Moors, and Wood Farm council estates were built.

Lye Valley lies between these developments and is also bordered by Southfield Golf Course (which was redesigned in the 1920s).

Until the late 1980s Lye Valley had been left pretty much to its own devices.

Girdlestone Road was the first part of Town Furze Estate occupied, while the rest of the estate was still under construction. The dwellings consisted of two-bedroom flats and three-bedroom houses (plus a small number of four-beds). The new tenants were families with children of varying ages, many of them relocated from “temporary” accommodation in and around Oxford, the result being a large influx of children to the area.

My family moved onto the estate in early 1955.

It wouldn`t have taken long before the older children discovered a fantastic and natural adventure playground on their doorstep. It was soon known as “the Dump”, “the Dip”, or “the Tip”, due to it being, to be honest, a dumping ground (the builders of both estates found it highly useful during construction work). Younger siblings were introduced to “the Dump” when appropriate, and this continued for many years.

I was born in the early 1960s. I was first allowed to play in “the Little Dump”, the area between the allotments and Girdlestone Road, supervised by my brother and two sisters, before graduating to “the Big Dump”.

During the previous twenty years some of the natural features of the Dump had been “adapted” by the estate kids, who seemed to be the only people who ever set foot there.

There was an entry point at the bottom of Heath Close. This led to an area known as “the Track”, a doughnut-shaped bike race track. This was a main assembly point for the hordes. The "track" was the first thing I remember seeing down there, in 1969 or 1970. My brother is nine years my senior and he remembers it from an early age also.

It was formed from red clay (rock hard) and was “banked”. It was like a speedway track and was basically "just there" and brilliant. I always assumed it had been formed by countless kids going round and round on “tracky” bikes (usually reclaimed from “the Dump”, no brakes, sometimes no saddles!). The Churchill was built in 1940 so it seems that the “track” predates its construction.

That path continued alongside the Churchill Hospital fence, across “the Meadow” and down to the Golf Course. A fallen tree across the brook was used as a bridge for many years (this was my route to and from school for three years in the late 1970s). A path led from “the Meadow” back towards “the Dump”. Another path ran to the Warneford Hospital, through more woods and meadows, now sadly gone and unrecognizable.

Another path ran from the area now known as “Warren Meadow”. This bordered the allotments, dropped into the valley, and then climbed again to the Slade. There were also paths into Lye Valley from Peat Moors.

An embankment rising to ten feet in height was in place at the allotment end containing two outlets which fed the brook. A “rite of passage” was to navigate both pipes as far as possible. One led to a chamber beneath the allotments (rumoured to be the dwelling place of various tramps – I never saw any); the other ran all the way up to the roundabout next to Rock Edge (I never got as far as that, not brave enough).

The brook meandered its way through the valley until it merged with the Boundary Brook adjacent to the Golf Course.

I did not see the slightest sign of life in the brook during my entire childhood, nothing whatsoever.

A path ran alongside the brook on “our side” to the Golf Course.

The Peat Moors side of the valley was heavily wooded. A line of trees on our side ran adjacent to the brook. The rest of our side was treeless, covered instead with “long grass”.

There were well known arsonists through the years that delighted in setting fire to this grass, and fire crews were therefore regular visitors in the summer. Although it was wrong it probably did some good, along the lines of stubble burning. I don't think that the fire-starters saw it that way however, they just liked setting fire to things. I'm afraid the fire-setting was an annual event from the 1950 onwards.¹

These natural features of “the Dump” were ideal. The path alongside the brook, being tree-lined, gave shelter from all types of weather. The woods and long grass allowed different activities and plenty of dens/hideouts.

¹ This arson was very harmful to wildlife: it incinerated vertebrates and invertebrates and left a rich residue which encouraged reed/grass growth which choked out the rare flowers (Ed.).

Along the brook were a series of jumps, easy, medium, and difficult. Your status was determined by your success regarding these jumps. These jumps were the cause of many broken wrists and ankles, along with the usual bumps and scrapes.

Another rite of passage was “the Slide”. This had been the main dumping location in earlier years, and was still used for that reason from time to time, unfortunately. Usually domestic appliances, carpets etc. but also cars: on one occasion an E-Type Jag was found at the bottom. Most dumped items were utilized by us in some form or another.

The “Slide” was situated at Warren Meadow, along from the path mentioned earlier and was near vertical. Again, your status rose if you were game enough to go down it, more so if you did it on a bike. Numerous injuries were sustained over the years.

It was territorial. Although we attended the same schools and were friends, they (Peat Moors) had their side, and we had ours. Most of the time this wasn't a problem but every now and again trouble flared, and just like the human race in general, at times an arms race ensued. Luckily we never got past the Stone Age. It wasn't so much Swallows and Amazons, more Lord of the Flies.

It could also be a very tranquil place, full of fauna (apart from the brook) and flora.

The management of the site was unco-ordinated. The paths were kept clear by being used. Overgrown areas were cleared for hideouts or for access. Most dumped items had a use found for them. General litter was light (compared to the rubbish found now at roadside verges, junctions, and roundabouts).

An army of kids spending vast amounts of time there over many years could achieve much more than the small teams provided by the Council once or twice a year.

I left home in the early 1980s and did not visit “the Dump” again until 1989.

I was shocked to see what appeared to be “official” vandalism. The trees on both banks of the brook had been felled and some sort of landscaping had been attempted near the embankment. I could not fathom why this “work” was being undertaken. I bumped into the team doing the work who explained the reasoning for the transformation. The landscaping at the allotment end was a filtering system and the trees were felled to allow the area to return to a fen. The fact that the valley was natural (not planted or landscaped artificially), and had been that way for countless years, seemed to me that it was quite content the way it was, and didn't need any help.

I moved back in with my parents in 2007. My twin daughters stayed with me at weekends. When I thought they were big enough I introduced them to “the Dump”, which was by now the Lye Valley Nature Reserve.

They were enchanted by the place, of course. The raised walkway was in place and the three ponds had been introduced. The brook was alive with sticklebacks, minnows, crayfish, and all sorts of invertebrates.

The ponds had frogs, sticklebacks and water boatmen.

The tree stumps between the walkway and the brook had been colonized by lizards.

The “Slide” and the “Track” have disappeared and the path from Heath Close now follows a different course, no longer running alongside the Churchill.

Although very different, it is still a magical place. It was wonderful as I remember it and remains wonderful as a Nature Reserve.

The army has disbanded: it is much quieter and serene there now.

It seems a shame that the Nature Reserve did not incorporate Churchill Meadow and the area from the three ponds to the Golf Course.

Additional comments

I am not sure what the buildings shown in the 1928 photo were used for but it seems there were a lot of quarries in the area (maps from the 1920s show Rock Edge as a quarry), so that may be the reason.

I'm surprised about the quarries (shown on a 1921 map) unless they were for clay. N.B. There was an area, near the three “new ponds”, where the clay was still evident, bright red, which my daughters took great delight in stomping through whenever possible. The Churchill was built on the site of a Roman Kiln/Pottery. During the 1971 dig I'm afraid we plagued the diggers daily with bits of old broken crockery from home or found at “the Dump”. They tolerated our nonsense and in fact gave us tours of the site on occasion. The main dig was south of Heath Close and just inside the hospital grounds. It's amazing to think of Romans being in “our manor” long before Oxford even existed. So, I'd hazard a guess that it was something to do with clay extraction.

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